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STD Control Plays Important Role in Reducing the Spread of HIV

Vancouver, BC-- In a panel discussion at the International AIDS Conference today, researchers stress the important link between the treatment of other sexually transmitted diseases and reduction in the spread of HIV. Judith Wasserheit, M.D., M.P.H., cites the results of a community-level randomized study in rural Tanzania which documented an approximate 42% reduction in new HIV infections when STDs were aggressively treated. Wasserheit is the Director of the Division of STD Prevention in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention.

The results of the study, which focused exclusively on treatment of symptomatic STDs, show the potential for dramatic reduction in HIV incidence. "Short of vaccines, I know of few preventive interventions in any area of health that deliver this kind of impact," states Wasserheit.

STDs are believed to increase the risk of HIV infection in at least two ways. STDs, such as chancroid, syphilis, and herpes can cause genital ulcers which may provide an easy route of entry for HIV. Even in the absence of ulcers, untreated STDs cause inflammation of the genital tract which may also increase the chances of infection.

"We have certainly known about the interrelationships between HIV infection and other STDs for some time," says Helene Gayle, M.D., M.P.H., Director of CDC's National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention. "But this is the first time we're seeing direct evidence of the impact of STD treatment on the rate at which people become infected with HIV."

A challenge in effectively treating STDs is developing interventions that provide easy access

to STD screening and treatment and that motivate populations at risk to seek that treatment. On the topic of increasing access to STD screening and treatment, also at the International AIDS Conference, CDC researcher William Levine, M.D. reports on a CDC study that examined a successful intervention resulting in increased STD screening and decreased STD prevalence among a group of brothel-based female sex workers (FSWs) in Bolivia. The challenge was to implement a prevention program in a resource-poor setting with low HIV prevalence and no effective public STD services. The study combined the initiation of STD services in public facilities with an intensive community-level behavioral intervention. Over a three year period, the number of FSWs being screened for STDs increased from 15 to 50 per month and STD prevalence declined more than 50%.

“STD prevention and control is vital to efforts to reduce HIV transmission. We are encouraged by reports of successful interventions that motivate populations at risk to seek STD screening and treatment,” adds Gayle. “We must continue to look for innovative ways to combine effective community level behavioral interventions with STD screening and treatment programs.”

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